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ABSTRACT

The Adolescent Diversion Project, an alternative to court processing for juvenile offenders, employs intervention strategies of behavioral contracting and advocacy. Youth (N=73) were assigned to one of three conditions: (1) the control group receiving usual court treatment; (2) the family condition involving a trained undergraduate volunteer who worked with the delinquent for 18 weeks and focused entirely on the family; and (3) the multi-focus group using volunteers who focused on several life domains. Outcome measures included police and court data, self-reported delinquent behavior, and school data. Process interviews were also conducted with youth, parent, peers, and volunteers. The multi-focus group showed a greater decrease in the frequency and seriousness of court and police contacts and reported less delinquent behavior than did the other groups. The multi-focus group was also superior in terms of school interactions. The broad-based multi-focus intervention appears to be preferable to the targeting of the family alone. The two experimental groups experienced less incarceration during the program than did the control group, thus supporting the continued use of diversion as an alternative to normal juvenile justice system processing. (NRE)

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The Use of Nonprofessionals to Provide Services to Diverted Delinquent Youth

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The Use of Nonprofessionals

to Provide Services to Diverted Delinquent Youth

The problem of juvenile crime has received increased attention over the past decade. The growing concern about this issue is reflected in the words of Saleem Shah, Director of the Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency of the National Institute of Mental Health: "It can be said with little fear of exaggeration that the phenomena of delinquency and crime constitute one of the most critical domestic problems presently facing the country" (Shah, 1973).

This interest in delinquency has led to the development of a great variety of theories of causation. These theories, in turn, have provided the stimulus for an equally expansive spectrum of intervention strategies. The majority of these interventions have dealt with the individual in isolation in an attempt to rehabilitate or otherwise treat the youth. While a wide range of different psychotherapy and counseling techniques have been implemented, the overriding conclusion is that they have been ineffective with this population (Levitt, 1971; Grey and Dermody, 1972).

Other strategies have been more concerned with the individual in the context of his/her environment. An example of a program which has made use of environmental explanations of delinquency to develop parallel environmentally based services to youth is the Adolescent Diversion Project, an NIMH-funded service and research project located in Lansing, Michigan. This paper will discuss the rationale and procedures for the services provided (behavioral contracting and child advocacy) the programmatic context for these services (the use of nonprofessionals and the diversion of youth from the juvenile justice system), and the research results evaluating the program's effectiveness.

Program Description

Modes of Service

The Adolescent Diversion Project employs two strategies of intervention. Behavioral contracting and advocacy are both based on environmental theories of delinquency and were selected for their theoretical strengths and practical applicability. A multiple strategy model allows increased intervention flexibility and an individualized approach to problem-solving.

Contracting. One of the two basic environmentally based services provided to the youth in the Adolescent Diversion Project is behavioral contracting. It has been noted that the parents of delinquents display unconstructive behavioral patterns such as unspecified and inconsistent contingencies, the use of aversive controls, attention to undesirable behavior, and a lack of attention to positive behaviors (Alexander and Parsons, 1973). These inappropriate behavior patterns have led to the development and use of behavioral contracts with delinquents (Stuart, 1971; DeRici and Butz, 1975; Tharp and Wetzel, 1969;, Stuart, Jayaratne, and Tripodi, 1976). The contracting process begins with an assessment of the contingencies operating between the youth and his/her parents. Each party is asked to express in behavioral terms the changes he/she would like to see in the other. Based on this information, a contract is written in order to specify the behavioral contingencies by which the privileges and responsibilities are exchanged. A monitoring system is designed to assess compliance with the contract. Renegotiation occurs as indicated.

Advocacy. A second environmentally based strategy, child advocacy, seeks to fulfill unmet environmental and social needs and protect the interests of the youth. Part of the rationale for advocacy comes from blocked opportunity theory (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). Cloward and Ohlin posited that all of society strives towards socially defined and accepted goals. However, key social, educational, economic, and political resources, which provide the legitimate means of accessing these goals, are differentially available to different subgroups of the population.

Illegitimate means are available, resulting in delinquency. An advocate plays a very important role with respect to these conditions. First, he/she acts to locate or generate community resources to fulfill the unmet needs of the youth and provide the opportunities that are lacking. The focus is on the individuals, organizations, institutions, and policies that are relevant to the youth's life. Second, an advocate is helpful in insuring the rights and interests of youth who are frequently vulnerable to many social institutions (e.g., school, juvenile justice system, etc.). Davidson and Rapp (1976) provided a model of advocacy services that vary along two continua. First, advocacy efforts can range from a positive "salesmanship" approach to an aversive negative approach. Second, the target of the effort can be either an individual, an agency or organization, or a policy.

Diversion

Two other components of the Adolescent Diversion Project are noteworthy. As the name implies, the youth in the project are diverted from the juvenile court as an alternative to normal court processing. The practice of diversion has been increasingly used with juveniles as a result of a number of criticisms of the juvenile justice system. These criticisms include the negative effects of labeling a youth as a delinquent, the lack of protection given youth in the juvenile courts, the fact that institutionalization is expensive, inappropriate, and ineffective and the arbitrary nature of some deviance (specifically, status offenses) (Krisberg and Austin, 1978).

Use of Nonprofessionals

Finally, the services provided the youth in this project are delivered by trained nonprofessionals. The use of nonprofessionals in human services was developed in order to meet manpower shortages. Since then, it has been shown to be effective with several different target populations (Durlak, 1971).

Acting in a helping role has also been shown to be beneficial to the helper (Riessman, 1969). Undergraduate students, who receive course credit for their participation, meet weekly in small groups conducted by graduate students. The initial eight weeks of meetings are devoted to extensive training. Later sessions are designed to supervise and monitor the progress of the students' cases.

Research

Experimental research examining the project's effectiveness is an integral part of the program's operations. Earlier research efforts employed the contracting and advocacy techniques within all appropriate domains in the youth's life. Recent practices in the Adolescent Diversion Project focused on the family as the prime area of concern. At issue was the relative efficacy of a little effort in a lot of areas or a lot of effort in one area. The family was pinpointed due to the vast quantity of literature linking the family to delinquency. Whether the particular attribution was the individual character disorders of the parents (Reiner & Kaufman, 1959), a sociological explanation of the effect of broken homes (Sterne, 1964), a theory relating to the effects of discipline or other parenting practices (Glueck & Glueck, 1962), the effect of lack of role models (Rivera and Short, 1968), a social learning theory dealing with the patterns of reinforcement (Bandura, 1969), or an attribution based on communication styles (Alexander, 1973), the family has been continuously nominated as a key influence in the development of delinquency. The family is also the most accessible of the social systems that are relevant to the youth. Finally, involving only the family in the intervention allows a bare minimum of labeling to occur.

Methods

Design. Youth referred to the project from the court were randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions. Those in the experimental condition received services provided by the project as described above. Those in the control condition received court treatment as usual. This typically consisted of a formal

or informal probationary period. Those youth assigned to the project were further randomly assigned to either receive services focused on the family only (Family Condition) or to receive services focused on a wide range of life domains (Multi-focus Condition).

Subjects. The 73 youth referred had a mean age of 14.5. Two-thirds of the youth were male; a similar percentage were white. The youth referred had committed serious misdemeanors or nonserious felonies.

Measures. Outcome measures included police and court data (frequency and seriousness of contacts and number of youths incarcerated), self-reported delinquent behavior obtained through interviews with the youth, and school data (attendance, grades, and credits earned). These data were subjected to a repeated measures analysis of variance with six time points, four quarters pre and two quarters during intervention.

Process interviews were conducted with youth, his/her parents, a peer that the youth nominated as someone he/she saw often, and the volunteer who worked with the youth. These interviews were conducted within a week of referral, six weeks into the intervention, 12 weeks into the intervention, and at termination. The interviews were designed to assess the process of intervention (what was being attempted and accomplished). A total of 11 scales were developed using a combination of rational and empirical (internal consistency) methods (Jackson, 1971). The reliability and validity of the scales have been discussed by Kantrowitz, Davidson, Blakely, & Kushler (1978).

Results

Before discussing analyses that employed condition as an independent variable, it is necessary to assess whether or not the two experimental conditions were actually different. A training test was devised to measure the basic concepts associated with the Multi-focus and Family interventions. The scales representing these two areas were devised using a combination of rational and empirical methods (Jackson, 1971).

The results of an analysis of variance on this training test showed that the Multi-focus group scored significantly higher than the Family group over the Multi-focus intervention scale, while the Family group scored significantly higher than the Multi-focus group on the Family scale. Therefore, it can be concluded that the two conditions did learn different concepts and skills prior to intervention.

The process scales that assessed the degree of implementation of the intervention strategies indicated that there were experimental differences between the Multi-focus and Family Conditions. A scale describing the extent of parental involvement in the intervention indicated that parents of youth in the Family Condition were more involved than those in the Multi-focus Condition ($F=5.61$, $p<.05$). Second, the volunteers and youth in the Family Condition participated in more contracting activities than did those in the Multi-focus Condition ($F=4.63$, $p<.05$; see Figure 1). Third, in keeping with the training provided to the two conditions, it was clear that the Multi-focus condition volunteers intervened in a wider variety of settings than did the Family contracting volunteers. Specifically, Multi-focus volunteers intervened more often in the area of employment ($F=3.72$, $p<.06$) and made more efforts focused on changing the school setting ($F=3.99$, $p<.06$). In addition, an analysis of variance performed on the scale assessing interventions focused on changing the youth within the school setting yielded a significant time by condition interaction. The Multi-focus group increased its intervention over time ($F=11.89$, $p<.01$) while the Family group decreased over time, though this decrease was not significant (see Figure 2). It is also important to note that the scale measuring the amount of time spent by the volunteer with the youth showed no condition differences. Therefore, each of the experimental conditions provided an equal amount of intervention, but with a different focus and using different methods.

The strongest and most consistent finding from the court and police data was that the youth decreased the frequency and seriousness of their contacts with the police and court over time. These decreases were shown by all three conditions, though Scheffé comparisons showed some evidence of the superiority of the

Multi-focus condition. The police and court variables were all highly intercorrelated. Therefore, the number of police contacts will be used as an example of these findings. Figure 3 shows the number of police contacts over time for the three conditions. It can be seen that the decrease in time was largely attributable to the high number of contacts during period four, which directly preceded the youth's entrance into the program. Self-reported delinquency showed a similar decrease in frequency over time. The period directly preceding entrance into the program had the highest level of reported delinquent behavior.

While these court and police data yielded no condition or interaction effects, the incarceration variable displayed a significant superiority for the experimental conditions. A Scheffé comparison of the two combined experimental conditions with the control condition showed that the youth involved in the project were incarcerated significantly less frequently than the the control youth during project participation ($F=3.83$, $p<.05$).

School data were also analyzed using analyses of variance. Again no condition effects or interactions were found although there were main effects for time. The overall tendency was for a decreased school performance over time, though the Multi-focus group did not experience as much deterioration as did the Family and control groups. For instance, percentage of youth enrolled in school did not decrease for the Multi-focus condition, as it did for both the Contracting and control conditions. Neither the Multi-focus or control conditions displayed the deterioration in grade point average or absenteeism that occurred for the Family group.

Discussion

This experiment was designed to further the knowledge concerning the effectiveness of a general model of diversion and intervention which has proved to be successful in the past. Specifically, the research addressed the question of the relative efficacy of providing intervention in one specific targeted area, the family, in comparison with intervention focused on variety of life domains. It is

clear that these two experimental conditions were in fact different. The training test indicated that the two groups learned different skills. The intervention scales demonstrated differences in the volunteers' practices which reflected the models in which they had been trained. Specifically, the Multi-focus group intervened in school, employment, and other extra-familial settings, while the Family group restricted its intervention to the home. Not only did the focus of intervention differ, but the techniques used showed some differences. Specifically, the Family group made stronger use of the contracting method.

Police and court records provided data for the standard criterion of recidivism. In addition, the reports of the youth themselves concerning their behavior provided additional information concerning the frequency and seriousness of delinquent activities. The two methods yielded similar results. The strongest result from the analysis of these data was the time effect. The period directly preceding the youths referral to the project was markedly higher than any other period or combination of periods for both the frequency and seriousness of delinquent behavior. This is not at all surprising, since referral to the project was the result of delinquent behavior. Because this effect was true for all conditions, condition effects on these variables were not anticipated. As a result, the interaction between condition and time was the more important effect. Though this interaction was not significant for the outcome variables, it did approach significance for several variables and Scheffé comparisons did indicate differences between groups over time. Specifically, the Multi-focus group showed a greater decrease in the frequency and seriousness of court and police contacts and reported less delinquent behavior than did the other conditions. The incarceration variable was not subject to the same inflation at the time period preceding referral to the project, and a significant condition comparison existed. The two experimental conditions showed less incarceration during the program than did the control condition.

In terms of school results, the superiority of the Multi-focus condition is again evident. This superior performance did not take the form of improved school performance as a result of project participation. Instead the Multi-focus intervention acted to halt a steady deterioration trend. These school performance findings paralleled the results from the intervention data that showed that the Multi-focus group provided a higher level of intervention in the school setting. Other process data indicated that the degree to which the youth was involved in school was negatively correlated with delinquency. This finding provides support for the argument suggesting the targeting of the school as a major area of concern when dealing with youth who have had contact with the juvenile justice system. It also acts as a partial explanation of the superior performance shown by the Multi-focus condition. It should be noted that although the Multi-focus condition received more training in the area of advocacy than did the Family group, the advocacy intervention scale indicated that both the Multi-focus and Family conditions provided a fairly high degree of advocacy. This suggests that advocacy is to some extent a natural tool employed by change agents, and that the differences in outcomes between the Multi-focus and Family conditions were not the result of the differences in techniques. Rather, the salient factor appears to be the variety of areas which were targeted for change in the Multi-focus condition.

Putting aside the question of the relative efficacy of the two experimental interventions, the research also provided additional support for the continued use of diversion as an alternative to normal juvenile justice system processing. Youth in both experimental conditions were incarcerated less frequently than those in the court condition. This was true despite the fact that there were no condition differences in frequency or seriousness of police and court contacts. Therefore, it appears that the system responded differentially to these two groups of youth. The lower levels of incarceration can be seen as a positive outcome when considering many arguments raised against institutionalization. Critics have pointed out that institutions are inappropriate, expensive, and ineffective, and that recidivism

rates are frequently 50% or higher (Empey, 1967; Stevenson and Scarpitti, 1971). Other authors have cited the conditions in institutions as unlivable (James, 1969). Institutions have the negative effect of forcing upon the youth interactions with other offenders in close settings (Feldman, Wodarsky, Goodman and Flax, 1973). A great deal of negative labeling also occurs (Empey, 1967).

In conclusion, it appears that broad based intervention effort is preferable to the targeting of the family alone as the focus for intervention. This is convergent with the findings of Ku and Blew (1977) who stated that successful outcomes with delinquents were characterized by intervention in a variety of life domains. The overall results are positive and encouraging in terms of providing support for the procedures and techniques used in this model (diversion, use of nonprofessionals, contracting and advocacy, intensive training and supervision) and act to encourage the increased use of similar intervention modalities with delinquent youth.

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Figure 1

Contracting Intervention

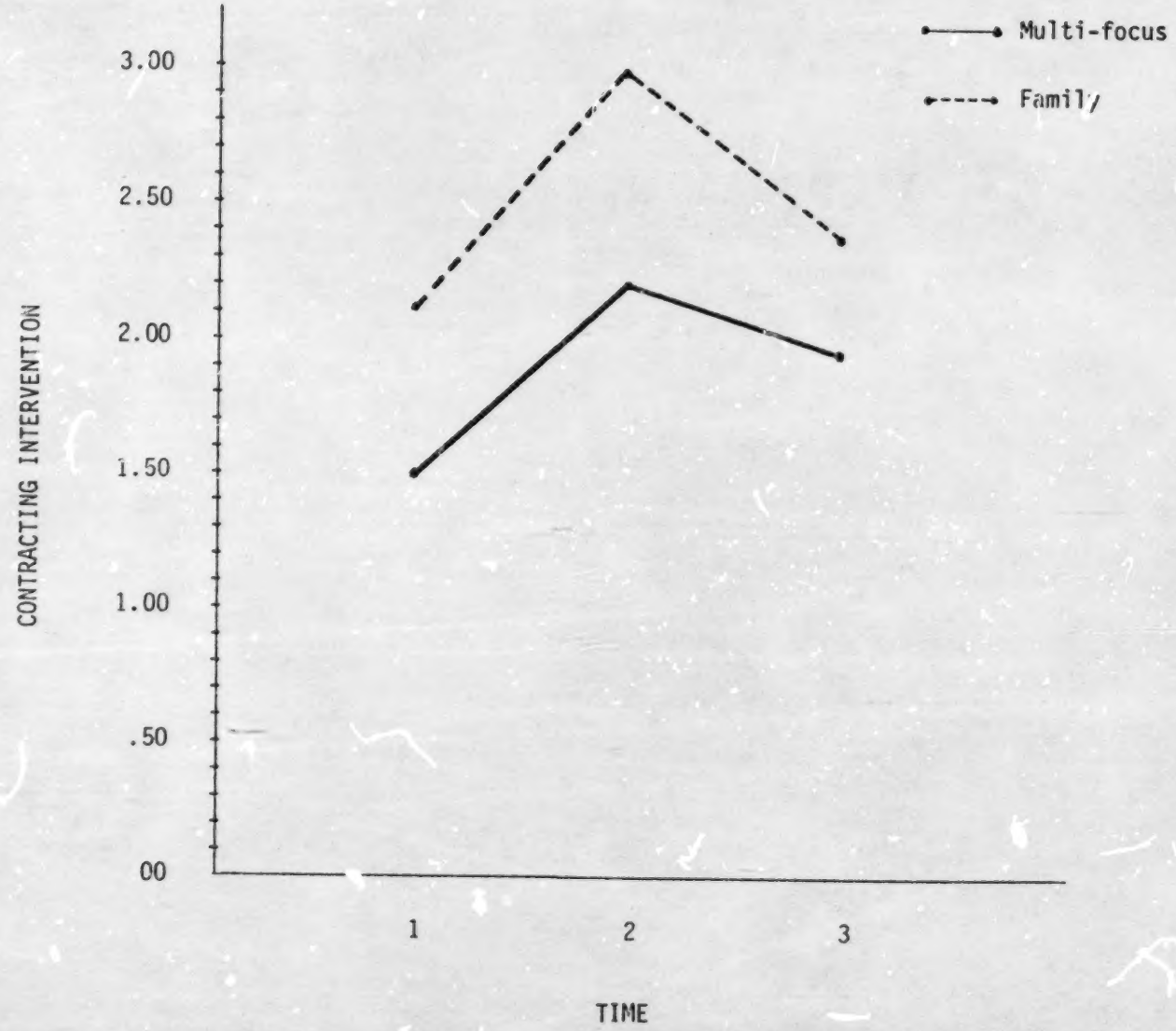

Figure 2

Intervention Focused on Changing
the Youth in the School Setting

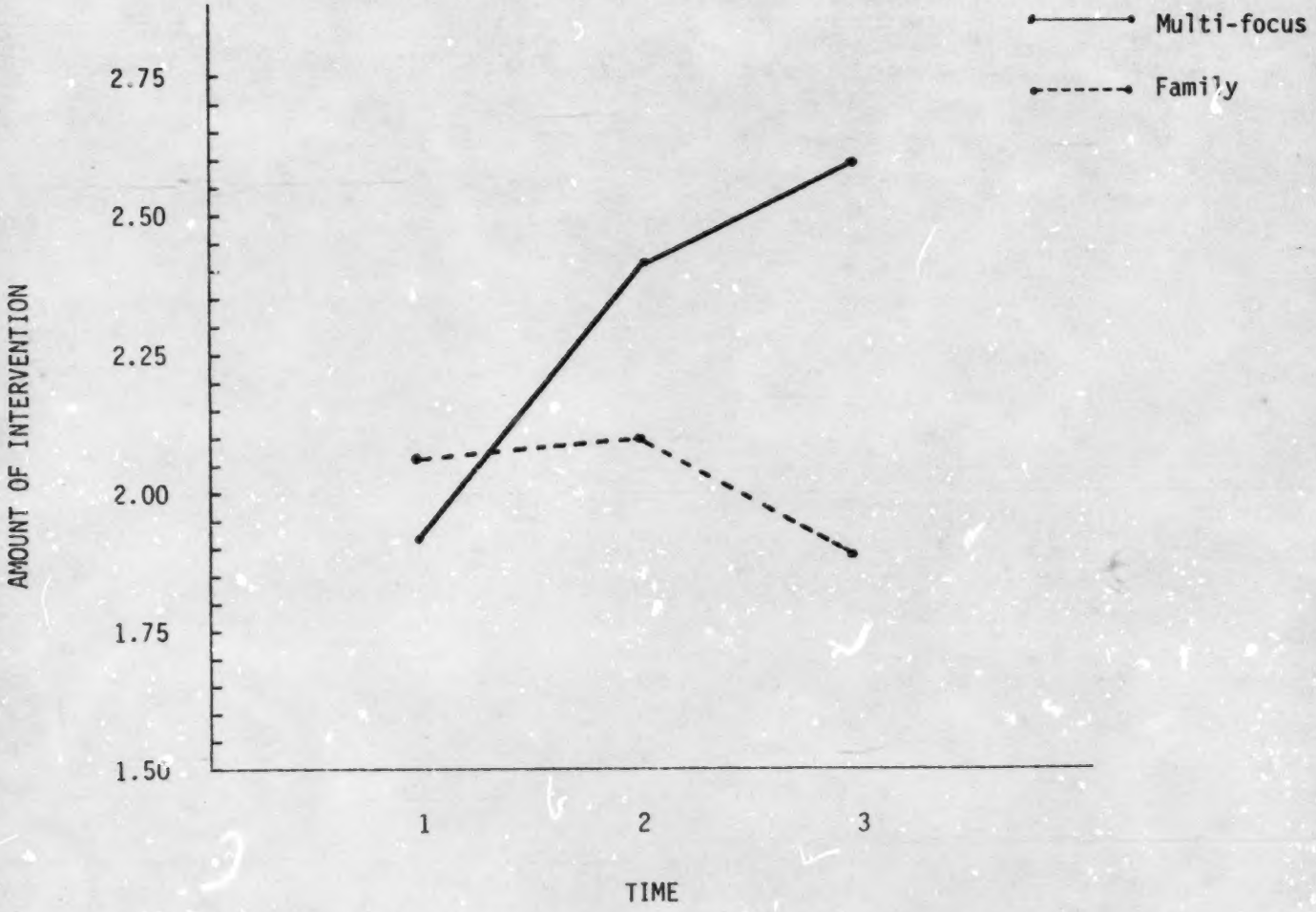

Figure 3

Average Annual Number of Police Contacts